

**Statement of Chairman Charles E. Schumer
Senate Committee on Rules and Administration**

Hearing on

**The SENTRI Act (S.1728) –
Improving Voter Registration and Voting Opportunities for Military and Overseas Voters**

January 29, 2014

First, I would like to thank Senator John Cornyn for sponsoring this bill with me. He and I share a deep commitment to protecting and strengthening the voting rights of military and overseas voters. I couldn't agree more with his statement on the Senate floor four years ago that if our soldiers can risk their lives for us, we can at least allow them to vote.

The SENTRI Act has already garnered strong bipartisan support. I want to recognize my partners in this effort—Senator John Cornyn, Senator Roy Blunt, Senator Sherrod Brown, Senator Thad Cochran, Senator Ted Cruz, Senator Angus King, Senator Rob Portman, Senator Marco Rubio, Senator Mark Warner, and Senator Roger Wicker.

The difficulties facing military and overseas voters are not new. In 1986, Congress passed the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act – known as UOCAVA. That required states to register service members and their families and other voters living overseas and to allow them to vote absentee.

While UOCAVA was an important step forward, many problems for military voters persisted. In 2009, I'm proud to say, Senator Cornyn and I worked together with other Senators to pass the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act – or the “MOVE Act” as we call it – as part of the fiscal year 2010 National Defense Authorization Act. On a bipartisan basis, we agreed that in a land where elections are the bedrock of our democracy, those who risk their lives should be able to choose their next commander-in-chief.

The MOVE Act was intended to ensure that ballots would be sent to military and overseas voters early enough to give them ample time to return the ballots and have them counted. It also prohibited states from rejecting otherwise valid voter registration and absentee ballot applications due to minor issues like notarization.

What we did in the MOVE Act has already improved voting for military and overseas voters by removing some of the biggest hurdles, but it is not enough. In the 2012 general election, only 70% of ballots transmitted were returned and the number one reason for returned ballots being rejected was that they were returned too late. Large numbers of military and overseas voters continue to experience problems with absentee voting caused, at least in part, by outdated voter registration or ballot delivery problems.

The recent report from the Presidential Commission on Election Administration highlighted some of the continuing challenges for military and overseas voters. In their work, the Commissioners found inconsistent implementation of UOCAVA and MOVE Act provisions. The Commission also found that utilizing technology to improve the voter registration process and increase access to election information would significantly help military voters. Many of the reforms of the SENTRI Act are designed to address these exact issues.

In this era of advanced technology, we can and need to do more to make sure that our troops receive their requested ballots in a timely manner and those ballots get counted on Election Day. The SENTRI Act does precisely that by correcting some of the remaining problems with the absentee balloting process for overseas and military voters.

The legislation improves voter registration and voting opportunities by requiring the Department of Defense to implement an online system where service members can register to vote, update voter registration information, request absentee ballots, and receive automatic notifications regarding voter status. In an age where accessing information online is par for the course, this online system is crucial.

The legislation also protects voting rights of military and overseas voters by requiring states to submit a pre-election report to the Justice and Defense Departments on the status of absentee ballot transmission. Having this information will allow the Justice Department to determine whether enforcement actions are necessary.

Additionally, states that fail to transmit ballots on time will be required to send them by express delivery, further ensuring that our service members can complete the ballot in time for the election.

The legislation also makes some technical corrections, such as clarifying that service members need only request absentee ballots once for all races in the two-year Federal election cycle.

Four years after we passed the MOVE Act, it is time to update and remedy known problems. It is simply unacceptable that those who fight to defend our freedom often face the greatest obstacles in exercising their right to vote. We cannot forget the plight of these voters.

Good work has been done in the last four years to make voter registration and voting easier for military and overseas voters. I firmly believe that the SENTRI Act will further that progress. With the 2014 elections 10 months away, passing this bill will end the effective disenfranchisement of our troops and their families.

I look forward to working with my colleagues to pass the SENTRI Act and see it signed into law.